

Public Testimony in Support of H.B. 5557: AN ACT CONCERNING RECRUITMENT
AND RETENTION OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS

By Elizabeth Kellert

To Senator Slossberg, Representative Fleischmann, and the esteemed members of the education committee, thank you for hearing my testimony on H.B. 5557.

For decades, studies have shown the correlation between high quality early childcare experiences and short-term and long-term successful outcomes for children. Quality early care produces such immediate behavioral outcomes as cooperative play, creativity, self-control, and language and cognitive development (St. Claire-Christman et al., 2011), all of which contribute to success in school and later in life. A key component to the quality of early childhood education is the recruitment and retainment of effective teachers who understand the developmental needs of young children and possess the unique characteristics that the job requires such as having a disposition that is patient, caring, supportive, creative, thoughtful, and aware. As a former childcare worker and pre-school teacher, I know first-hand that the job is not an easy one. To be successful at it, significant time and thought must go into the planning and preparation of the classroom and the curriculum, and every day can bring unexpected challenges. Teachers must give 100% to be available for their students and parents; they must be able to simultaneously address what is happening in each moment, apply their own knowledge on early child education and development, and work toward short and long term goals to help realize the full potential of each child.

However, despite all of what goes into being the effective early childhood

educator and caregiver that every family desires and deserves, in this country the wages early care teachers make systematically undervalue the profession. According to the National Association of the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), childcare teaching assistants make about \$10,500 a year, and the highest paying early childcare teachers make about \$18,000. In Connecticut, according to the United States Department of Labor, childcare workers make a mean hourly wage of \$11.16/hour. That's only 49 cents higher than that of cashiers. Pre-school teachers make a mean hourly wage of \$17.36 an hour. (http://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes_ct.htm#25-0000) This is undoubtedly a better wage, but it is still below the rate of living wage in Connecticut, which is estimated to be 19.08/hour for a single adult (Stuart, 2014). All too often, child-care workers and pre-school teachers have to rely on public assistance to make ends meet, and despite the love for their craft, they have to seek other career paths in order to make a living.

In today's economic climate, when many parents have no choice but to have two incomes or single Mom's have to accept low-wage work, the demand for affordable childcare with qualified educators and caregivers is more acute than ever, especially in areas with underperforming schools and achievement gaps. It can be inferred that the health and well being of the future of our country depends on it. Furthermore, the number of preschool teacher jobs is increasing throughout the country and in Connecticut, where according to the department of labor, the number of preschool teachers is expected to increase by 14.3% in the ten-year period leading up to 2022 (PreSchoolTeacher.org).

With the current wages being what they are, it is unclear what incentive there is for potential educators to invest in a degree in child development or early childhood

education when they will not be able to make a living wage as an early childhood teacher. I know from my own experience, that I was a young, dedicated, and caring early childhood educator and caregiver with an advanced degree that could not make ends meet on the wages I earned at positions that involved incredible amounts of energy, skill, and dedication. I noticed that my colleagues who had stayed in their places of employment for many years were all married, and therefore did not rely solely on their own incomes and in many cases the lack of benefits that accompanied them. I also noticed that the schools and facilities I worked for were also feeling tremendous financial pressure despite the high cost of the services they provided, ensuring that wages for teaching staff remained low. It became clear that there is a need for major changes in this system at large, involving more public investment in early childhood education to ultimately insure successful outcomes for young children.

As a bill that mandates a compensation schedule for early childhood educators, H.B. 5557 is a necessary step in the right direction to ensuring that families have access to quality early childhood programs. According to a survey by NAEYC, the voting public understands the value of early childhood education, with 62% of respondents recognizing birth to age 5 as the most crucial time to children developing their capacity to learn and 88% ranking early childhood educators as either very important or extremely important in their communities, along with firefighters and nurses. It is time that public policies and wages reflect this public opinion, that early childhood educators are vital contributors to our society.

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